

The New Jersey Shore...

TOILERS of the SEA

*Commercial Fishermen
Establish State Among
Nation's Top Five in
Value of Sea Catches*

By JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

CAPT. TONNES ANDERSON of Point Pleasant eased his 61-foot Jenny through the swelling Atlantic on April 22, 1956, carefully picking his spots to get the best use from the net dragging the ocean floor abaft of the stout fishing boat. Routine to be sure, but exciting, too, in a mild sort of a way—for that net always offered the possibility of riches snatched from the sea 100 miles off the New Jersey coast.

Suddenly the boat came to a staggering halt, pitching Capt. Anderson against his wheel and flattening the crew against the deck. The winch cable to the drag net stretched taut; to the crew's horror the trawler began to back up. The Jenny found herself battling something in her net far greater than even a giant tuna.

"A whale!" yelled a crewman as the boat wavered crazily on a rolling crest

This is the 16th of a series of articles on the New Jersey Shore. Next Sunday the writer will discuss facilities and delights available to The Compleat Angler off the state's coast, recognized as one of the world's great fishing grounds.

and threatened to capsize at any moment. Capt. Anderson struggled with the wheel, fighting to keep the pitching vessel on course, aware this battle with the unknown could mean disaster for him, his crew and the boat he loved so much.

The steel cable hummed under the tightening strain, then snapped with the crack of a rifle shot. Relieved of her unseen tormentor, the Jenny shuddered violently again, then slipped down through a wave trough, her broken drag cable slapping against the hull. No more fishing for the netless trawler this trip. Back to Carlson's Dock in Point Pleasant she hastened.

FOUR days later the atom-powered submarine Nautilus surfaced at Groton, Conn., her superstructure draped



One of few remaining spots along the New Jersey shore where fishermen still go "off the beach" in pound boats for livelihood is Long Beach Island where the above scene was snapped last summer.



Pt. Pleasant fishermen repairing nets, a never-ending job for men who go down to sea in ships. RIGHT: Fishing boats at Pt. Pleasant wharves provide real life props for cameramen.



with the drag net snatched from the Jenny and Capt. Anderson. "When Tonnes hooks something," laughed a Point Pleasant mate, "he hooks 'em big!"

It ended well, of course. The government paid the captain \$1,300 for his gear. Television crews and newspapermen swarmed over Carlson's Dock, suddenly a place of importance. Above all, the Nautilus gave Tonnes Anderson a fabulous tale to top all tales of fabulous catches. As long as New Jersey Shore fishermen gather anywhere to recount their legends, someone will always say:

"Remember the time Tonnes Anderson caught that deep-sea giant, that Nautilus or whatever you call it?"

Legends and yarns there are aplenty when commercial fishermen gather—tales of whales and swordfish and giant tuna wrapped in trailing nets, tales of pound nets filled with thousands of butterfish, tales of excitement and danger and disaster. Down on New Jersey's commercial fishing docks a different breed of men lives and works, close to the elemental excitement of the sea.

THESE are men who work hard—incidentally hard at times, particularly when fishing is at its height in June and July. Often they are up at 4 a.m., work until midnight and then rise again at 4 a.m. to start all over. These are men who know heartbreak, who seek uncertain rewards, who never know when their meal tickets will disappear completely—as, for example, the mackerel have disappeared in the past six or seven years.

Quite probably, few of the men who gamble their time and money in the hopes of earning a living with their nets and their muscles are even casually aware of the economic significance of commercial fishing in New Jersey. Most fishermen are rugged individualists; if their nets have "drawn water" today, there is at the moment for them no significance in the fact that fishing is a 10 to 12-million-dollar-a-year industry in New Jersey.

Nevertheless, the fishermen and those thousands of visitors who seek the salty and picturesque flavor on the fishing docks should know that only three states—California, Washington and Massachusetts—clearly outrank New Jersey in value of fish caught. Virginia is neck-and-neck (or is it net-and-net?) with this state, so New Jersey is sometimes fourth, sometimes fifth, nationally and hasn't been lower than sixth for decades.

TRUE enough, this lofty standing is largely because of the massive hauls of menhaden brought into the three menhaden processing plants within New Jersey, but a fish is a fish. Menhaden counts, but tremendously—in 1956, 461 million pounds of these oily fish were landed in New Jersey ports at a value of \$6,975,000.

But there were tons of other fish—six million pounds of fluke, 5½ mil-

lion pounds of porgy, four million pounds of sea bass, two million pounds of whiting. These are the "edible" fish, and, in total, New Jersey fishermen last year brought in some 30 million pounds of fluke and porgy and bass and whiting and 40-odd other types of fish.

United States fishing statistics show that some 5,000 men are engaged in commercial fishing within New Jersey, practically all of them, of course, down along the shore. They use nearly 2,000 boats (about 400 of them major-sized) to chase the elusive fish.

So much for statistics, since commercial fishing is much more than numbers of dollars, numbers of men, numbers of fish. Anyone who strolls down to the docks recognizes that.

THE average visitor quite likely wouldn't know a croaker from a cod or a sea robin from a sea bass, but that in no way impairs the enjoyment of the docks. On those wharves there is the quaintness and romance that so many hope to find near the sea, be-

cause fishing is about as close to nature as a man can get these days to earning his livelihood.

Fishing docks have a never-ending fascination. About them and on them neat coils of rope create eye-pleasing patterns. Nets dry in the sun. Flat-bottomed boats back from the sea snug in tightly to the docks, their masts and chains and hawsers providing natural props for the photographer. Sea gulls, the fisherman's good luck symbol, scream overhead. There is no pretense; no effort to make the weather-beaten docks sparkling and modern. You like the docks as they are—or go away; you won't be missed.

Excitement rises when the boats come home, trailed by the raucous gulls. Even the old-timers, beached by time, edge up to the front. "How many?" they ask tersely. "A thousand," calls a laconic crewman from the deck of the boat being eased up to the dock. Everyone falls to, sorting the fish—laughing, joking, glad to be home.

Deep are the roots of most fishermen along the New Jersey coast. Most of them are Scandinavian, for Swedes and Norwegians have dominated commercial fishing on the New Jersey shore for 75 years—except at Sea Isle City, where a group of Italian fishermen pit skill and boats against the fish.

NATURALLY commercial fishing has a long history. Whalers first settled the coast and in 1683 East Jersey Gov. Gawen Lawry was instructed in London that he must "take particular inspection into the convenience of fishing . . . lest the fishermen be drawn elsewhere for want of encouragement."

There was no want of encouragement. Indeed, by 1878, when New Jersey passed its first law to regulate seine fishing in bays, commercial fishing had become a three-million-dollar-a-year business—so vital an enterprise that bitterness and dissension swept over fisheries.

Warfare broke out. In 1885, fisher-

(Continued on Following Page)

JUNE 9, 1957

25



ABOVE: Lined up at docks in Otten's Harbor, Wildwood, is part of fishing fleet, one of largest along Atlantic coast, that works out of state's ports.



RIGHT: Unloading surf clams at Wildwood docks. Last year 11 million pounds of the succulent bivalve, with a total value of \$1,212,000 were brought ashore.



Menhaden boats with distinctive crow's nests ride out a fall storm in safety of Cape May Harbor.



Scene at Sea Isle City dock as fishermen sort, weigh and pack in crushed ice freshly caught seafood for shipment to markets as far as Pittsburgh.

(Continued from Preceding Page)
men at Holly Beach (now Wildwood) fired cannon balls at menhaden boats close offshore. Up near Galilee and Nauvoo (Sea Bright) the "hook and liners" rowed out to the pound nets at night, covered them with gasoline and burned them to water's edge. Men fought as if every fish hauled ashore would be the last.

Never again is commercial fishing apt to be as colorful as in the days between about 1870 and 1910, when the beaches at Sea Bright swarmed with hundreds of fishing boats drawn up from the surf and beached on the sand.

FISHERMEN had come to what is now Sea Bright as early as 1820, lured by the famous fishing ground around Shrewsbury Rocks and the easily sloping beach which made the launching of boats less dangerous than at other portions of the coast.

The fishermen built shanties and erected ice houses and by 1880 fishermen flocked to Nauvoo and Galilee

from as far away as Cape May. During the summer many Swedish sailors left their ships for a summer's fishing at Nauvoo—and from this beginning dates much of the Scandinavian air along the docks today.

Old-timers similar to 77-year-old Axel Carlson of Point Pleasant remember well those Sea Bright two-man skiffs—16 to 18 feet long, topped by a small sail. There were as many as 300 boats before World War I, and since the average daily "fare" reached as much as 150 pounds a day, the average net fare soared to as much as 45,000 pounds daily—an astounding total when reckoning that most of this was with simple hook and line.

"Hook and liners" are not vanished by any means, by the way. Scores of them still go out in skiffs, seldom more than 30 feet long. They fish the grounds frequented by sports anglers, fishing either at night or early in the morning before the party boats appear on the scene to disturb them. These are the true independents. They fish two or three to a boat, using hand

lines and gill nets. Often they have some incredible catches. When such as bluefish or mackerel are running heavily they can bring in as much as 1,000 fish to show for a night's work.

IMPRESSIVE though that might be, considering the relatively crude methods employed, the "fares" of those skiffs fade into insignificance when weighed against the menhaden (pronounced men-HAY-den). This is far and away the most important commercial fish, nationally as well as in New Jersey. Nevertheless, its very bigness makes it possibly the least known of all commercial fishing.

The menhaden is a somewhat scorned fish, principally because it is too oily for average human consumption. The menhaden thus has picked up not entirely complimentary names: mossbunker, pogy, bony fish, bug-fish, fatback, old wife and hardhead.

"Menhaden" is an outgrowth of a noble Indian word, meaning "that which enriches the earth," and it's likely that a menhaden was the fish

dropped into each Indian corn hill in the pre-colonial days. For years the primary reason for harvesting menhaden was to grind them up as fertilizer, but in recent years the lowly menhaden's oil has come to be tremendously valuable—for fertilizer and for use in making soap, linoleum, oilskin clothing, paints, varnish and plastics. It's used even in tempering steel, but the processing of menhaden is mainly to produce dairy and poultry feed.

Menhaden (or bunker) boats are a familiar shore sight during much of the year, since they often come in close to shore and their bulky lines are familiar, especially because of the crow's nests. From these nests schools of the silvery-sided menhaden are spotted—although airplanes today supplement the range of the ship's observer.

ONCE a school is sighted, a "striker" or a "catcher" from the mother ship rows out to its location in a dory. Behind him trail two "purse" boats, which encircle the school and quietly play out a net to surround the fish. Then the "purse line" is quickly drawn on the bottom, thus preventing the fish from "sounding" and escaping under the net.

At this point the menhaden are in a broad net bag, or purse. Crews burst into rhythmic song, singing sea chanteys handed down through the years and designed to ease the work of drawing in the purse and transferring fish to the mother boat. Once the thousands of fish had to be shoveled into the mother boat; now they are hauled in by suction.

Menhaden fishing is a big business, and getting bigger all the time. In 1952, 231 million pounds of menhaden were unloaded in New Jersey; by 1956 that total had doubled to 460 million

pounds! The menhaden is a delightfully cooperative little fish, reproducing at a rate to keep up with the demand. There seems no end to his good-natured growth—and since the menhaden eats only vegetable matter he doesn't ruin other fishing. Further, since the menhaden doesn't run with other fish, few edible fish, if any, are netted when the purse string is drawn.

Menhaden are brought into three chief points in the state—Belford on Raritan Bay, Crab Island near Tuckerton, and at Wildwood, where huge processing plants are located. The Belford operation, complete with an air strip for spotting planes, also helps keep alive one of New Jersey's distinctive fishing techniques—pound fishing.

POUND fishing thrives in Raritan Bay because menhaden are trapped there for the Belford plant. Once pound fishing centered almost completely in the Atlantic Ocean; in 1914, the first year statistics were kept, there were 112 pounds in the Atlantic, only 35 in Raritan Bay. Today, thanks to hurricanes, high labor costs and poor runs of fish there are a mere 17 traps (pounds) in the Atlantic and 93 in the bay. In these bay nets are trapped as much as 40 million pounds of menhaden in a year (ocean traps, on the other hand, catch edible fish).

Nearly everyone who has been at the shore is familiar with pound nets, or at least with the poles which support them a couple of hundred yards off shore. The nets themselves, 50 feet square and as much as 60 feet deep, are hidden beneath the surface, fastened to the poles.

Long nets stretch out underwater from one end of the pound like a funnel. Fish swim into this, fight forward toward what seems freedom, but only to find themselves trapped in the pound. Once each day, from March to September or October, the pounds are visited and emptied. Sometimes the haul is tremendous (Axel Carlson caught 1,000 boxes of butterfish in one trap in 1947; it took three days to get the catch in to dock). At one time huge tuna—up to 1,000 pounds—were found in the nets. Sometimes the haul is worthless sea robin, or worse, a "water haul."

HURRICANES ripping up the coast in 1944 and again in 1950 provided the final blows, but pound fishing had been declining before that. Nevertheless, 20 years ago one of the really spectacular sights was the launching of the pound boats from the beaches at a score of spots. Today all but two fisheries on the entire coast berth their wide-beamed 30 to 35-foot "mackerel" boats in bays or lagoons.

Basically, what appears to be wrong with pound fishing these days is that fish must come to the pounds—and that's archaic, in an era when draggers and seiners can go far out to sea and locate schools of fish with electronic fish finders.



Drying in sun at Wildwood Crest dock are some of black-tarred pots used in trapping sea bass. Large seiner is in background.

The draggers and seiners do just that, sweeping out for a day, two days or several days. Draggers or trawlers haul their nets behind, seeking to entrap fish in the open-throated net held open by "otters" (doors) on the sides or by beams on the bottom. Seiners surround their quarry and pull tight the purse—catching menhaden, porgy, and (a few years ago) mackerel.

Draggers and seiners have been active in the open seas for about a half century, but their reach has been lengthened by the fish finders. Small wonder, then, that while New Jersey fishermen still bring in some 30 to 40 million pounds of edible fish each year—about the same as 50 years ago—most of it is brought in by the boats which go to the fish.

IT hasn't been clover, of course, for the draggers and seiners. There are two depressing factors—fluctuating costs of fish (a man can be pushed to the wall in a hurry) and the absolute unpredictability of fish.

Whoever questions that fish are unpredictable can ponder the mackerel situation. For decades the great fishing fleets of Boston and Gloucester each year in the early spring swept their seines over the Atlantic off the

New Jersey coast in the early spring. For many years the Gloucester fleet sought refuge and fresh drinking water inside Sandy Hook. Later the New England vessels put into Cape May harbor year in and year out. Mackerel was a tremendous business—worth two to three million dollars every year in New Jersey.

Oddly enough, the greatest catch in history preceded the abrupt demise. Mackerel fishermen in 1949 reported 17 million pounds of mackerel caught by seine boats off the New Jersey shore. The following year the huge fleet came back—and caught 250,000 pounds, give or take a few thousand pounds. The following year a scant 25,000 mackerel were netted. So, in two years, mackerel dropped from 17 million pounds to 25,000 pounds!

The mackerel haven't returned. Most fishermen think they will come back, perhaps as precipitously as they disappeared. It has happened before with other fish. During World War I, for example, the menhaden—the prolific menhaden—seemed completely gone from these same waters. Who knows, one of these fine spring nights a lookout will spot the "fire in the water"—the flashing sides of the mackerel; so will the mackerel return.

COMMERCIAL fishing has many facets, enough to fill a good-sized book. There are little fellows as well as big—the hook-and-liners mentioned previously, the gill netters and the rugged individuals who every spring set their sea bass pots out by sunken wrecks. Every April the docks in Wildwood and several other spots are clogged with the black tarred pots—similar to lobster pots—ready to be strung out near sea bass grounds.

Another facet of commercial fishing revolves around the rapid rise of dredging far at sea for surf clams (an interesting name, since "surf" clams burrow on the bottom). This has become big business ever since the clam chowder and clam freezing interests have found ways to clean the sandy mollusk.

Clamming has enticed many an erstwhile dragger or seiner to buy several thousand dollars' worth of gear to seek surf clams far at sea—often a full day's trip from shore. The result has been a huge rise in clam hauls—from about 250,000 pounds in 1942 to 11 million pounds in 1956 (valued at \$1,212,000). Some say surf clams "saved" the Wildwood fishermen.

FEW landlubbers ever experience the thrill of a trip to sea aboard a commercial fishing vessel, but they can—and do—get the vicarious knowledge of home coming.

Home-coming time means much at fisheries in Belford and Monmouth Beach and Point Pleasant and Ship Bottom and Atlantic City and Wildwood and Cape May. But of all places it seems to touch home most intimately in Sea Isle City, where fishermen live close to the lagoons from whence they sail before dawn and return to at night.

Fishing has been a way of life at Sea Isle City for three generations. Poor hauls can mean a disaster on the back docks unmitigated by the resort spending which surrounds most other fishing areas. Elsewhere, however, many sit by with poorly hidden tension while they look for the return of the fishing boats. As they "mug up" constantly from the coffee pot with its thick black liquid they reminisce, they guess at what the oncoming boat may bring.

THEN the boat comes in—loaded. The price is good. There is joy on the docks. If the boat has been at sea six or seven days the men get paid and "pack out" to home or possibly, a nearby bar. (There's a saying that "if you want to talk to fishermen you have to know how to be able to take a drink.")

In the happiness an old retired captain leans his chair back in the sun and watches the younger men at work. He lights a pipe and says in his Scandinavian way:

"Yumping Yimminy, dey tink dey voork. You tink dey voork. Dese boys never voork like old man . . ."

The "boys" look up and grin. "Ah, get outta here, Pop," says one. "We work as hard as you guys ever did." And, to a bystander, it does seem like work, at that.